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Contentment

One of the important qualities of human beings is contentment. For the construction of a better society, it is necessary that its members should never foster discontent. For a society bereft of contentment will also be bereft of the atmosphere of mutual love.

The Prophet of Islam once observed: 'That person earned salvation who accepted Islam and was given provision (*rizq*) according to his needs and he was content with what God bestowed upon him (*Sahih, Muslim*).'

In the present world man's greatest good fortune lies in his remaining a thankful servant of God. Only that person may become a thankful servant in the real sense who possesses this inner contentment. According to a hadith, (Ibn Majah) the Prophet said, 'Become content and then you will become the most thankful servant of God. '

Contentment gives man the blessing of a heart at peace. Those who are not content are eventually consumed by greed. And when individuals succumb to greed, they cannot remain content, whatever the circumstances. They always keep complaining about one thing or another.

Contentment grants man mental peace, while greed produces mental confusion and disturbance. Contentment raises man to a high mental level while greed causes man to descend to a low mental level. Contentment makes one love others while greed makes one hate others. Contentment is a means to spiritual uplift while greed leads to spiritual degeneration.

A feeling of contentment enables a person to rise above trivialities and live in the higher realities. In short, he becomes a simple liver and a high thinker.

Divine Planning

Adam was the first man as well as the first prophet. The generations succeeding Adam (according to some traditions) adhered to the path of monotheism and true religion for about a millennium. Adam's people later came under the influence of polytheism (2:213). The Prophet Noah was then sent to reform the descendants of Adam who inhabited the green, luxuriant land lying between the Tigris and Euphrates.

Despite the Prophet Noah's prolonged efforts, Adam's progeny, with the exception of a very few, remained resistant to renouncing their polytheistic religion. Consequently, the Great Storm came and swept away all human existence from the earth. Now the human race made a fresh start with the followers of Noah. But again this new generation, with the passage of time, digressed from the path of monotheism to the path of polytheism. This went on, repeatedly, for many centuries. God continued to send prophets in succession (23:44), but far from showing any willingness to accept their message, people laughed His apostles to scorn. (36:30).

This process continued for thousands of years until polytheism came to be firmly rooted in human existence. Anyone born in the societies of those days came under the influence of polytheism from his surroundings. Religious rituals, social ceremonies, national affairs, governmental organisations, – all were founded on polytheistic beliefs. Ultimately, the situation deteriorated to the extent that any child born in this world opened his eyes in an atmosphere of idolatry and when he closed his eyes for the last time, it was in that same atmosphere. The practice of idolatry, once having set in history, became ineradicable. It is this state of affairs which finds expression in this prayer of Noah: 'Lord, do not leave a single unbeliever in the land. If You spare them, they will mislead Your servants and beget none but sinners and unbelievers.' (71:27).

The Prophet Abraham, who lived between 1800 and 2000 B.C., attempted to reform society in ancient Iraq, but met the same fate as that of the prophets preceding him. Then God devised a new plan for the guidance of man. It meant preparing a human race by exclusive divine arrangement, totally detaching them from the sphere of polytheistic influence, so that they would find it easier to accept the message of monotheism. Then people so conditioned were to be used, as per the divine plan, to encounter and rout out the forces of polytheism in order to change the course of history.

Accordingly, Abraham was commanded to leave populated areas like Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Palestine for the desert land of ancient Makkah and settle his wife and little child Isma'il there. Being an uncultivable valley, this area was totally devoid of human population, hence completely free from ancient polytheistic culture. This is what is meant by Abraham's prayer: "Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a barren valley near Your Sacred House, so that they may observe the prayer" (14:37). That is to say,

Abraham consciously chose a place which was beyond the influence of polytheism, so that there might arise a generation, nurtured in an environment free from polytheistic influences, who would become true worshippers of the one God.

The effect of such detachment from a cultural continuity is illustrated by an example from the life of the writer who belongs to an Urdu-speaking area. My parents spoke Urdu, which is the mother tongue of my children. Now it happened that my eldest son took up residence in London in an area with a predominantly English speaking population. As a result, my grandsons only knew English and could not express themselves in Urdu. On my visit to London, I had to converse with them in English.

My grandsons were in this linguistically deprived state precisely because they had been brought up in an environment completely cut off from the continuous traditions of Urdu. This would not have been possible had these children been brought up in Delhi. *

*Now my grandsons live in Delhi, and in this changed environment they are now well-versed in Urdu.

This is on a parallel with the story of Abraham, Ishmael and his mother Hajira. The dream shown to Abraham (37: 102) was a symbolic one. Abraham, however, with his extreme sense of obedience, stood ready to execute his dream. In ancient Makkah there was neither water, nor vegetation nor any resources to sustain life. Settling his wife and child in such adverse circumstances appeared to invite their death. But the plan of giving birth to a generation detached from the polytheistic traditions could be carried out only at a place devoid of sustenance, because only then would it be devoid of human population. Abraham's dream ostensibly entailed the economic and social sacrifice of his children, but it was actually a way of realizing the divine plan to prepare the desired generation.

Since this plan had to materialize under the veil of cause and effect it was constantly being watched. Abraham himself stayed in Palestine, but would keep going at intervals to Makkah for the purpose of supervision.

Initially, Hajira and Ishmael were the only inhabitants in the valley. Later, with the appearance of Zamzam, some gypsies belonging to the Jurhum tribe settled there. When Ishmael grew up, he married a girl of that tribe. According to traditions, once when Abraham went to Makkah from Palestine, Ishmael was not at home. Abraham enquired of his wife how everything was going on. His wife told him that they were leading their lives in a very bad state. Life was full of hardship. As Abraham took his leave he asked her to convey his regards to Ishmael and to ask him to change the door-sill of his home. When Ishmael returned and heard the message from his wife, he realized that the visitor must have been his father and that his message symbolically implied that he should divorce his present wife and marry another woman of the Jurhum tribe. To Abraham that woman was not worthy of mothering the generation under preparation.

After some time, the Prophet Abraham again visited Makkah. This time too Ishmael was away, but his wife was at home. When Abraham asked her how things were going on, she thanked *God* for everything

and talked of contentment, saying that life fared well for them. When he left, Abraham asked her to convey his regards to Ishmael and to give him the message that he should keep the door-sill of his house. On his return, Ishmael received the message of his father and rightly understood its symbolism: that this woman was capable of leading a life in accordance with the divine plan assigned to Abraham to prepare the generation desired by God. (*Tafsir Ibn-Kathir*)

In this way, in that hostile, aloof environment, a new generation began to be formed. What were the characteristics of this race? The two most prominent characteristics were their being in tune with nature and possessing the human quality of manliness.

The only thing to influence man in this rugged, hostile, Arabian Desert was nature: vast wilderness, high mountains, starlit sky. These natural phenomena gave man the message of the unity of God. They were perpetual reminders to man of God's greatness and omniscience. These pure, divine surroundings nurtured a generation which, in the words of Abraham, had the real capacity to become an Islamic community, that is, one which could surrender itself completely to the Will of God. The nature of this community was preserved intact in its original state; hence it was fully capable of accepting the religion of nature.

It was then the most suitable environment for nurturing that characteristic which is called al-Muruwah (manliness) in Arabic. Life was full of hardships in the mountainous and rocky surroundings of ancient Hijaz, and in that setting innate human qualities had acquired the maximum importance, as external props were totally non-existent. There, man possessed only one thing, and that was his own existence. In such an environment, it was but natural that man's inner qualities should be cultivated to the maximum. In this way a nation, characterised by manliness to an amazing extent, came into being through a process spanning two thousand years. In the words of Philip K. Hitti, the whole of Arabia was converted into a nursery of heroes the like of which had never been found before or after in history.

The hour had come with the dawn of the 6th century to bring to completion the plan of breaking the continuity of *shirk* (idolatry). It was then that the Prophet Muhammad was born among the Ishmaelites. These are the words of the Qur'an:

It is He who has sent His Apostle with guidance and the Faith of Truth, so that he may exalt it above all religions, much as the pagans may dislike it (61:9).

This verse shows that the main mission of the Final Prophet was to remove the religion of polytheism from its place of domination and establish the religion of monotheism in its place, giving it a position of dominance in the world. This dominance was to be of an intellectual and ideological kind. That is, a dominance similar to that gained by scientific knowledge over traditional knowledge in modern times.

This was the most difficult plan ever conceived in history. In the 7th century it was the hardest of tasks to stamp out polytheism and replace it with monotheism as the predominant ideology. It was just like uprooting a tree with all its roots and branches. It entailed severe difficulties and could be performed only with meticulous planning and strenuous effort.

To secure this goal the Final Prophet was provided by God with two special supporting factors. One was the divine proclamation:

You are the best nation that has ever been raised up for mankind (3:110)

As a result of a two thousand years long process, a most competent group was prepared for the purpose. As mentioned above, this group had retained its nature (i.e. that with which it had come into existence, preserved intact and free from all the corruptions of civilization) and also possessed in perfect form, a high moral character and manly attributes. It was the people selected from this group who, after their acceptance of Islam, came to be known in history as the companions of the Prophet.

The other special divine succour is hinted at in the early verses of chapter 30. Prior to the advent of the Prophet, there had existed two great polytheistic civilizations in the world, the Byzantine and the Sassanid. The major populated part of the globe at the time, was directly or indirectly, under these two empires. For monotheism to prevail over a vaster world, a confrontation with the polytheistic empires was inevitable. God did bring this about during this period and the confrontation of these two empires continued for generations. First the Persians rose and, destroying the power of the Romans, occupied a large part of their empire. Then the Romans rose to avenge their defeat by destroying the might of the Persians. That is how, when the Companions rose unitedly under the guidance of the Prophet, they rapidly conquered most of the inhabited part of Asia and Africa, subjugating polytheism, and securing for monotheism its rightful place.

To quote Professor Philip K. Hitti:

The enfeebled condition of the rival Byzantines and Sassanids who had conducted internecine warfare against each other for many generations, the heavy taxes consequent upon these wars, imposed on the citizens of both empires, and undermining their sense of loyalty....all these paved the way for the surprisingly rapid progress of Arabian arms.

(*Philip K. Hitti, History of the Arabs*, London, 1970, pp. 142-143)

Historians in referring to this turning point have generally represented the foregoing events as having taken place in the natural course. Whereas this extraordinary turn of events was the result of a divine plan specially conceived of by God for the support of the Final Prophet.

An article titled, 'Islam', penned by a Christian writer and published in an American encyclopedia, has this to say:

Its advent changed the course of human history.

It is quite true that after the Islamic revolution of the first phase (of Islam), human history saw such tremendous changes as had never before been seen. The actual reason for all these changes was that the continuity of polytheism came to an end, yielding place to the continuity of monotheism. *Shirk* (polytheism) was and is the root cause of all evils, while monotheism was and is the source of all virtue.

Hence the occurrence of this fundamental change opened for man the door of all virtue, which had hitherto remained locked.

Now the age of superstition gave way to the age of science. The foundation of human discrimination collapsed, giving place to human equality. Dynastic rule was replaced with democratic rule. Where natural phenomena all over the world had become objects of worship, now for the first time they were treated as subjects of research and investigation. This paved the way to the revelation of nature's secrets to man. It was indeed the monotheistic revolution which laid the foundation for bringing about the modern age of advancement. Abraham's prayer, "Lord, preserve me and my descendants from serving idols. Lord, they have led many men astray" (14:36), had been answered.

Now the question arises as to how people were misled by these idols. What qualities did these inanimate objects possess which helped them in this regard? We can understand this secret if we have a look at the idols prevalent during Abraham's time and referred to in Abraham's prayer.

The idols were of the sun, the moon and the stars. It has been proved historically that these bright, heavenly bodies were objects of worship everywhere in the civilized world of Abraham's time. This gives us a clue as to how and why these idols managed to lead the people astray.

Although God is the greatest reality, He is invisible to the eye. On the contrary, the sun, the moon and the stars, shining brightly, are visible to every eye. Due to their brilliance people came under their spell and began worshipping them. These brilliant bodies captured human thought to such a degree and so dominated people's minds that even governments, nay, empires began to be founded on their basis. The emperors of that age ruled over people by declaring themselves to be the descendants of sun and moon.

This age was brought to an end by monotheism gaining supremacy through the Final Prophet. This was carried out in two stages. The first stage is referred to in the Qur'an in these words:

And fight with them until there is no more persecution (*fitnah*) and religion should be only for God; but if they desist, then surely God sees what they do (8:39)

Fitnah in this verse means religious intolerance, which in ancient times had become a form of oppression. Polytheism had become aggressive because it was the bedrock of all governments and as such enjoyed full State patronage. In such a situation, whenever the call to monotheism was raised, it was but natural for the rulers to feel strongly that such a call, in holding their right to rule suspect, posed a challenge to their sovereignty. Therefore they wasted no time in crushing the *da'is* of monotheism. This was the actual cause of ideological aggression in ancient times.

The Prophet Muhammad and his companions were commanded by God to fight for the extirpation of polytheism to put an end to the *da'is* of monotheism being the targets of polytheistic aggression. That is to say, that *shirk* and politics were separated from one another. The Prophet and his companions launched this campaign with full force and devotion, and it was due to their unceasing efforts that the power of *shirk* was given a death blow. Subsequently, in most parts of the inhabited world of the time,

the polytheistic system was subjugated, thus putting an end to the aggressive status of *shirk* forever. Now for all time polytheism and political power were thrust into separate arenas.

The second stage of the domination of monotheism over *shirk* is mentioned in this verse of the Qur'an:

We will show them our signs in all the regions of the earth and in their own souls, until they clearly see that this is the truth (41:53).

The first phase of this mission aimed at putting an end to the practice of deriving political theories from natural phenomena.

This goal was fully achieved in the seventh century. The second stage aimed at removing the veil of superstition from the phenomena of nature and casting upon them the light of knowledge. This second stage began with the era of prophethood (of the Prophet Muhammad) and later reached its zenith in the present scientific revolution.

The present world is a manifestation of the attributes of God. Here man finds his Creator in the mirror of His creation. By making a profound study of creation, he witnesses God's power and greatness. The ancient idolatrous concepts had, on the contrary, rendered all material things of this world mysteriously sacred. The superstitious ideas which had come to surround them came in the way of research being carried out on the multitude of objects in this world. When the entire world came to be held as God's creation in the wake of the monotheistic revolution, this mentality of holding everything sacred vanished. Now everything began to be studied objectively.

As a result of this investigation, the truth about the hidden system of nature and its functioning in the world began to be revealed. Ultimately, in the form of the modern scientific revolution, the prophecy mentioned above in verse 53 of chapter 41 was quite finally fulfilled.

to be continued

The Rights of Human Beings

A believer has important responsibilities towards both God and man. His duty towards God means believing in Him with all His attributes, worshipping Him, regarding himself accountable to Him; and making himself ready to carry out wholeheartedly any such demands that God may make upon him.

Another responsibility of the believer is one which concerns the rights of human beings. This responsibility devolves upon him in his relations with others. Every man or woman, a relative or neighbour, a fellow townsman or compatriot or one with whom he has dealings in business – everyone has some rights over him. It is incumbent upon a believer to fulfill those rights, failing which he will not be deserving of God's succour.

What is meant by recognising the rights of human beings (*Huquq al-Ibad*)? This means that whenever and wherever a believer meets another person, he should give him such treatment as is in accordance with Islamic teachings. He should refrain from such behaviour as does not come up to the standard of Islam.

Examples of proper Islamic behaviour are giving respect to others, never humiliating others while giving them help, acting for the good of others, and if unable to benefit them in any way, at least doing no one any harm, fulfilling trusts, never breaking them; never usurping the wealth and property of others; dealing justly with others regardless of the circumstances; giving the benefit of the doubt to others, not believing in allegations made against others without proper proofs; advising others in earnest etc.

Everyone has a duty to fulfill these responsibilities towards other human beings according to the Islamic shariah. This is called *Huququl Ibad*, or human rights.

The Scientific Temper

At a Door Darshan panel discussion on 'The Scientific Temper', (New Delhi, June 2, 1998 – including, besides myself, a central Minister, a social activist, a professor, an English journalist and a lady educationist), I quoted Pandit Nehru as having said as early as 1947, that what his country required more than anything else was just that—the scientific temper. I further made the point that we need to know exactly what is meant by this expression. Broadly interpreted, it means having a realistic attitude. In one of his prayers, the Prophet is recorded as having asked God to enable him to see things just as they are (*Allahuma arenal ashyaa 'kama heya*). This clearly indicates that having the scientific temper, or pursuing a scientific line of thought, is the equivalent of coming to grips with reality.

We live in a world which has an existence of its own, functioning according to its own immutable principles. Scientific thinking is, therefore, extremely important for the successful development of both the individual and the nation. The secret of success is to see the world around us with an open mind and to acquire an understanding of the laws of nature. This approach will produce positive results, enabling one to form correct judgements about things as they actually are. This is what is meant by having the scientific temper. In this world, the real achievers are those who, by fostering this bent of mind, are able to confront the truth.

Scientific thinking, largely, is a question of ratiocination based on facts. This applies equally to the world of matter and to human affairs. For instance, if you have to build a bridge over a river, the science of engineering will tell you to build it from iron and not from clay. Similarly, if you want to harvest a particular crop, the science of horticulture will tell you not only that you must sow the seeds of that crop (and not for example plastic pellets!) but also how to irrigate and fertilize them.

Similar principles apply in the human world. Good results can be achieved only if full account is taken of all of the relevant facts. Failing this, the desired outcome will remain elusive. If, for example, you want someone to be your supporter, the science of psychology will tell you that you must activate his conscience and appeal to his better feelings. But if, on the contrary, you speak or act in such a way that his ego is hurt, you will turn him into an enemy. If you want to receive something from someone, you shall have to become in his eyes a giver, and not just a beneficiary, for it is a matter of common experience that most people are used to giving only to those from whom they receive. Then, if you aspire to a position of honour, you had best be unassuming in demeanour, because it is the modest man and not the egoist who makes the greatest impression on the better side of human nature. It is the unpretentious individual who is most likely, therefore, to attain to a position of honour and prestige.

Going Against Nature

Shri Guru Golwalker, the brain behind the RSS, has categorically opposed the concept of a uniform civil code. His opposition is based not on religion but on nature. His stand is that a uniform code is not at all practicable on account of its being unnatural. He expresses it thus: "Nature abhors uniformity."

This applies not only to the uniform civil code but also to life in its entirety. The system of life is based wholly on the principles of nature – principles which stand on their own strength and will last for all eternity. An individual or a nation has no option but to conform to them. None can oppose them, whatever the circumstances. Flying in the face of nature is of as little use as attempting to combat an earthquake, or trying to halt an avalanche with an out flung arm.

It has repeatedly happened throughout the history of the world that individuals or groups, having come into power, have imagined – quite falsely – that they could do whatever they wanted, namely, break up the prevalent map of life and replace it with a map of their own choice and fabrication. To this end they have launched major initiatives which have been baneful for humanity as a whole. But history tells us that every such effort has met with ultimate failure, and that the system of nature has emerged unscathed. This law of nature has been in operation right from the time of Chengiz Khan to Nadir Khan, from the times of Hitler and Stalin down to present-day dictatorships. There is not a single exception throughout the entire span of human history, one of the principles of nature being that it is peace and not war which is sustainable in this world. Here it is justice and not injustice which endures. Here it is modesty and not arrogance which eventually finds a place in the sun. Running counter to this law is like beating one's head against a brick wall.

The Expression of Truth

Addressing the Prophet and the believers, the Qur'an enjoins: "Stay firmly upon the right path as you are bidden, together with those who have repented with you, and do not transgress. He is aware of what you do. Put no trust in the wrong-doers, lest you should be touched by the Fire. None but God can protect or help you." (11:112-13, 17:73-75)

A true *dayee* is the well-wisher of his people to the ultimate extent. He is also desirous to an extreme degree that people should adopt the religion of truth. But no matter how strong his urge to communicate the message of God, he very often finds that his listeners are provoked by it and, instead of coming closer to the divine truth, they are actually distanced from it. When the *dayee* describes the greatness of the one God, they show a strong antipathy for this, as if the message of God's glory is bound to nullify the effulgence of their saints, who have wrongly come to be accorded the same status as that of God, which is His due by divine right. When he condemns the evils inherent in them, they turn against him.

With the negativism of his listeners in mind, the *dayee* tends at times to adopt a moderate approach in order to bring the *madu* closer to him. But God does not approve of this conciliatory attitude. What is of actual importance in the eyes of God is the pronouncement of truth, and not the making of concessions to the people. Besides, if the *dayee* takes a softer line in his communication of the divine message, he could be accused of attempting to enhance his personal popularity in order to derive some material benefit from the situation. But whatever profit he gained would necessarily be at the expense of the truth. It would mean that God's word would become vague and unclear. In the eyes of God the actual crux of the matter is the clarity of the message conveyed to the people. If the truth becomes obscured for the *madu*, the exercise of *dawah* is rendered futile.

Respect for All

On seeing a funeral procession pass along a street in Madina, the Prophet of Islam is recorded by one of his companions, Jabir ibn Abdullah, to have stood up. When his companions saw the Prophet standing, they too stood up. Then one of the companions asked the Prophet if it was not the funeral of a Jew. The Prophet replied: "You should stand up on seeing any funeral pass by." According to another tradition, Sahal ibn Hunayf and Qays ibn Sad were in Qadsiya when a funeral procession passed by. On seeing it; both of them stood up. When told that it was the funeral of a non- Muslim, they immediately pointed out that when the Prophet had stood up for the funeral procession of a Jew, and a similar remonstrance had been made to him, he had replied: "Was he not a human being?" (*Fathul Bari*, 3/214) This teaches us an extremely important principle of Islam, namely, that a human being is worthy of respect, regardless of his origins and traditions. This applies even if he belongs to an inimical community. Irrespective of his cultural and religious background, he will be looked upon as a human being and will be accorded all due honour. Man is a peerless creature of God. In the words of the Qur'an, man has been created in the noblest image: he is a masterpiece of creation. All human beings are specimens of God's miracles. Therefore, in spite of the many ways in which they may differ from one's own people, they are worthy of respect. All strangers deserve to be given due honour – simply in their capacity as human beings. The true believer sees divine light in everything. He sees in His own creation the miracle of the Creator. By an extension of the awe he feels for God's handiwork, the believer is compelled to see all other human beings as creatures worthy of the greatest regard.

Islamic Character

In chapter 38 of the Qur'an, the prophet David is thus addressed by God: "Rule with justice among men and do not yield to lust (intense desire), lest it should turn you away from God's path." (38: 26)

God has laid down a straight path of virtue for man and then implanted the sense of this in human nature. If man were to trust his instincts and follow this silent guidance, he would never become a prey to deviation. He would unerringly follow this straight thoroughfare of life, until he reached his final destination.

There is only one thing which leads man astray from this path of divine guidance, and that is his own unquenchable desire. Lust causes man to waver at every turn in life; the wise man is one who does not allow himself to be swayed by its influence. One who succumbs to his own desires will necessarily fall by the wayside, his ultimate fate being abasement and destruction.

Human desires lead man astray in many ways. At times they lure him away from the deeper realities of life towards the false glitter of the world. At times momentary gain leads him far afield from the path of permanent gain. At times, man allows himself to be provoked by matters of sheer prejudice and, giving no forethought to the outcome, involves himself in such confrontations as lead to serious hostilities. In the end, it is he himself who suffers the maximum losses.

To lead a successful life, man must keep his negative urges under control, rather than be controlled by them, for his own insatiability is his greatest enemy. The better way of life, as opposed to one guided by desire, is that based on a sound code of ethics. Far from falling a victim to his baser self, man should conform to a set of high human principles. He should be governed in thought, word and deed not by the mere urge to pursue selfish aims, but by a deep and innate scrupulosity.

Two Models

The Prophet of Islam once observed that whenever he presented Islam to anyone, he was always conscious of some hesitation or the other on the part of his hearer. But the case of Abu Bakr was an exception to this rule. When the message of Islam was conveyed to him, he accepted it without expressing any doubt or hesitation. (*Hayat As Sahaba*, 1/68). It was because of this attribute of Abu Bakr that he came to be called As Siddique, the true friend. The example he set during the early phase of Islam was a very fine one.

Another such example is found in the life of Umar Farooq, the second Caliph. It is generally known, that, in the beginning, Umar Farooq was an inveterate opponent of Islam. But then, purely as a matter of chance, he perused a part of the Qur'an. He thereupon took the firm decision to change his attitude and wholeheartedly accepted Islam.

These are two types of models which give us clear guidelines as to what our behaviour should be. In any such instance, an individual should be either of the first or of the second type. No third type is desirable when it comes to acceptance of the truth.

On the pattern of the first type, sober contemplation and profound thinking should make a man's mind so mature that he is able, quite independently, to grasp realities. Intellectually, he should be able to develop the capacity to penetrate any veil of doubts or misgivings and – without entangling himself in irrelevant controversies – see things in their real shape, just as they are. This would demonstrate the highest degree of intellectual maturity, the ultimate example of this being Abu Bakr.

Inspired by the second example, the individual should be entirely free of prejudice. He should be free, too, of any complex which would prevent him from realizing his shortcomings when they are pointed out to him, or which would make him hesitate to admit his mistakes. In this, he should follow another example set by Umar Farooq. During his reign as Caliph, it happened several times that he made ill-considered decisions, but when his errors were pointed out to him, he admitted his mistakes without the slightest reluctance. So profound were his feelings about having made wrong judgements and so deep was his appreciation of having been corrected, that such words would come to his lips:

"Had such and such a person not been here, Umar would have been destroyed."

In the Light of Experience

It is your Lord who propels your ships across the sea so that you may seek His bounty. He is indeed Merciful towards you.

When at sea a misfortune befalls you, all but He of those to whom you pray forsake you; yet when He brings you safe to dry land, you turn your backs upon Him. Truly, man is ever thankless (17:66-67).

This world is functioning in consonance with particular laws set forth by God Himself. That is what makes it possible for man to travel over the water, in the air and on the earth. This was so ordained that man might recognize the blessings of God and be His thankful servant. Regrettably, whatever man sees happening to him and around him, is considered by him to be all a matter of cause and effect. All the events that stem from the munificence of the Creator, are taken as happening on their own. These engender neither feelings of gratefulness to God nor the realisation of His might.

The realisation of God is deeply embedded within man's own nature, but rises to the surface only in times of great calamity, in the face of which he feels himself helpless. For instance, when a tempest overtakes his ships on some vast ocean, all artificial veils are removed from his vision. He recognizes the One God and starts invoking Him alone.

Man is made to undergo this temporary experience in order that he may mould his entire life accordingly, with momentary recognition turned to permanent faith. But how sad a reality it is that he is reminded of God only on such occasions as being engulfed in tempests. It is even sadder that he becomes oblivious of his Saviour as soon as he is delivered from the storm.

Accepting the uniqueness of God's divine nature is *tawheed* (monotheism); refusal to accept it is *shirk* (paganism, polytheism and idolatry). The reality respectively of *tawheed* and *shirk* are recognition and non-recognition of the oneness of the godhead.

Neighbours

Neighbours are our nearest companions. After family members, it is neighbours one comes in contact with. Developing good relations with neighbours is therefore an important aspect of a God-oriented life.

A neighbour, be he a co-religionist or an adherent of another religion, be he of one's own community or of another, must always be taken good care of. He must be given his dues at all events, according to the demands of the shariah and of humanity.

According to a hadith, the Prophet of Islam observed, "By God, anyone who is a threat to his neighbour is no believer."

According to this hadith, if a Muslim becomes a source of trouble to his neighbours, his faith itself will become suspect.

The humanity of a person and the first criterion of his religiosity and spirituality are tested by the way he behaves towards his neighbours. The relationship with a neighbour serves as a test of whether a person has human feelings or not, and whether he is sensitive to Islamic teachings or not.

If a person's neighbours are happy with him that is a proof of his being a good man, but if his neighbours are unhappy with him that is a proof that his behaviour leaves much to be desired.

The commands in the shariah regarding neighbours indicate that a believer must make concessions to his neighbours unilaterally. That is, by doing good to them even if they are ill-behaved towards him.

Being a good neighbour is the first step towards becoming a good human being. It is the good neighbour who will find a share in God's blessings in the Hereafter.

The Way of Gentleness

After adopting the teachings of Islam, the attitude formed in the believer is that of gentleness. In Islam he discovers the reality that God is great (*Aliahu Akbar*). This discovery brings to him the realisation that greatness belongs to God alone; it does not belong to him or to anyone else. As a result, modesty, humility and tolerance are engendered within him. Having a temperament marked by such virtues, in particular, tolerance to the maximum degree is a necessary condition for adherence to the path of gentle behaviour. In this present world we are repeatedly faced with unpleasant experiences as a result of the wrong thinking and misdeeds of others. Hence only those can firmly tread the path of gentleness who are able to refrain from the psychology of reaction. That is why true believers are described in the Qur'an as "those who curb their anger and those who forgive their fellow men" (3:134).

According to a tradition recorded by Bukhari and Muslim, the Prophet once observed: "God is gentle and loves gentleness in every matter." On another occasion, the Prophet expressed the same idea in these words: "God is gentle and loves gentleness. He grants to gentleness what he does not grant to harshness or to any other thing." Similarly there is another hadith to this effect: "One who is bereft of gentleness will be bereft of all goodness" (*Sahih, Muslim*).

In a contentious situation, if you treat people with haughtiness, you will awaken their egos, which will only escalate matters. If earlier you were confronted with bitter words, you will now be compelled to bear the brunt of stones being hurled at you. If instead, you opt for gentle behaviour in your dealings, you will awaken peoples' consciences. Now the result will be quite the opposite. If earlier the person concerned was your opponent, he will now lose all his antagonism and will become your closest friend. Gentleness is an attribute of successful people, while haughtiness signals imminent failure.

The Preservation of the Qur'an

The Qur'an was revealed over a period of twenty-three years and was written down in its entirety during the Prophet's lifetime, although verses were not gathered together in one volume at that time' (Al-Katani V. 2, p. 384). The very first injunction given to the Prophet—'Read in the name of your Lord who created'—stressed the importance of knowledge (96:1). And the last words of revelation pertained to the life hereafter (2:281).

For the first twenty-three years the Prophet himself was the fountainhead of Qur'anic learning. Then he appointed certain of his followers to impart the Qur'an after him. These were men who, having memorized the entire Qur'an with complete accuracy, were fully competent to impart its teachings. During the caliphate of Umar Faruq, the second caliph of Islam, a man who had come from Kufa to Madina told the caliph that there was someone in Kufa who was teaching the Qur'an from memory. At this Caliph Umar was enraged. But when he found out that the person was none other than Abdullah ibn Masood, he cooled down, (*Istiab*, Vol. I, p. 377) the reason being that Abdullah ibn Masood was one of those who had been appointed by the Prophet himself to perform this service. Other more prominent scholars of the Qur'an were as follows: Usman, Ali, Ubayy ibn Kaab, Zayd ibn Thabit, Ibn Masood, Abu Darda, Abu Moosa Ashari, Salim Maula Abi Huzayfa.

However, these Muslims, who had been assigned this task, could not survive for ever. Undoubtedly, they were going to leave the world one by one and then there would be the risk of the Qur'an falling into the hands of less responsible, less knowledgeable people, who might not preserve it intact and who would most probably differ as to the true meaning of its content. There was even the danger of its being entirely lost to posterity. With the death of 700 of the Prophet's Companions in the Battle of Yamamah in 12 A.H., this danger began to loom large. It has been recorded in the annals of history that "when Salim Maula Abi Huzayfa was martyred, Umar felt the danger of the Qur'an being destroyed and came to Abu Bakr, the first Caliph, to discuss this" (*Fathul Bari*, v. 9, p. 5). (Salim was one of the few surviving companions who had been selected by the Prophet himself to impart the teachings of the Qur'an to the people). The solution suggested by Umar to Abu Bakr was to preserve the Qur'an by making a formal compilation of it in written form.

As has been established, the Prophet always arranged for each passage of the Qur'an to be recorded in writing as soon as it was revealed. This *kitabat* (writing down on paper) was so meticulous a procedure that after verse 95 of chapter 4 had been revealed, and the words "except those who are disabled" were revealed again as an addition to the same verse, it was arranged that this phrase – according to Imam Malik – be written at the same moment by the transcriber.

It was customary for the Prophet to ask the transcriber to read out the verses after writing them down. According to Zayd ibn Thabit, if any part was missed out in the writing, he would correct it and only after this written work was fully completed would the Prophet allow the propagation of those verses (*Majmauz Zawaaid*, vol. 1 p. 60). The number of transcribers who worked at different times is put at forty-two. According to Ibn Abdul Bar, Hanzala ibn Rabi was the chief transcriber. He was asked to remain in the company of the Prophet at all times (Aqd Al-Farid, v. 4, p. 114). It was as a result of this foolproof arrangement that by the time of the Prophet's death a number of the companions possessed passages of the Qur'an in written form. A sizeable number even possessed the complete Qur'an in its present arrangement.

Four of these are worth mentioning: Abu Darda, Muaz ibn Jabal, Zayd ibn Thabit and Abu Zayd.

It has been established from authentic traditions that the angel Gabriel, who conveyed the revelations of God to the Prophet, himself arranged these verses. According to the traditions, each year during the month of Ramadan, Gabriel came to the Prophet and recited before him all the Quranic verses revealed up till that time in the order in which they exist today. And after listening to the recitation by the angel Gabriel, the Prophet repeated the verses in exactly the same order. This dual process has been termed *al-Irza*, 'mutual presentation,' in the books of Hadith.

It has also been established that in the last year of the Prophet's life, when the revelations had been completed, Gabriel came to the Prophet and recited the entire Qur'an in the existing order twice, and similarly the Prophet also recited to Gabriel the entire Qur'an twice. This final presentation is called *al-Arz al-Akhirah* in the books of hadith. (*Fathul Bari*, p. 659-663)

When by the help of Gabriel the Qur'an was fully and systematically arranged, the Prophet recited it to his companions on different occasions in the order with which we are familiar today. The Qur'an was thus preserved in its pristine form in the memories of tens of thousands of the companions during the lifetime of the Prophet.

The preservation of the Qur'an passed through three stages: transcription, compilation and collection.

In the first stage, as soon as a chapter or a verse was revealed, it was written down on a piece of writing material. The following items are mentioned in books as examples of the writing materials used:

Riqa' a – Thin leather piece

Likhaf – Thin slates of white stone

Katf – The round bone of the shoulder of the camel.

'Asib – The wide part of the root of the date branch.

In the hadith, the second stage of this process is referred to as compilation. That is, first the verses were written down at the time of revelation. Then, when one chapter was completed, the whole chapter (often it took several revelations to complete one chapter) was written in compiled form, i.e. arranged in proper

order on *riqa' a* (leather). Such copies of the compiled Qur'an (complete or incomplete) were in the possession of a large number of people during the lifetime of the Prophet. We have the well known incident of Umar who beat his own sister and brother-in-law mercilessly for having accepted Islam. Finally, when his anger had subsided he asked them to show him the book they were reading from. His sister replied that he could not touch it in a state of impurity and only after he had bathed himself did his sister give him the book (Ibn Hisham). It was, of course, a copy of the Qur'an.

The third stage of this process is termed "Collection" that is, writing down the entire Qur'an together in one volume. The form of the bound volume consisting of pages of the same size was not prevalent in the Prophet's time. According to a narration recorded by Bukhari, only four companions Ubayy ibn Kaab, Muaz ibn Jabal, Abu Zayd, Zayd ibn Thabit had the entire Qur'an put together during the life of the Prophet. However, the status of these collections was that of a personal possession. In *Kanzal Ummal*, referring to Muhammad, Ibn Kab Al-Qurzi gives us the names of five such collectors of the complete Qur'an. What the caliph Abu Bakr did as a matter of state patronage was to have it bound after arranging for all the verses to be written on square papers of the same size. Imam Malik has also recorded (citing as his source, Shahab Zahri, who had learned it from Salim, son of Abdullah ibn Umar,) that Zayd ibn Thabit had written down all the verses of the Qur'an on *al-Qaratis* (papers of the same size) at the command of Abu Bakr. The Qur'an having been written on one size of paper during the caliphate of Abu Bakr, this volume was called *Raba'a* (Square). (Itqan, v. 1, pp. 84-85)

It is said that during the caliphate of Umar Faruq there were more than one lakh copies of the Qur'an in circulation in Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, etc.

In later times the written Qur'an became the main source of Islamic learning. But one danger was still lurking. In sacred books even very minor differences become a source of great controversy. It was feared that if people wrote the Qur'an on their own, differences in *kitabat*/transcribing and recitation (it is just like writing 'eether' for 'either') would create widespread dissension and there would be no way of putting an end to the ensuing discord. For instance, just one word in the first chapter of the Qur'an was written in different ways according to the pronunciation of different dialects: like, *maalik-e-yaumauddin*, *malik-e-yaumuddin* and *maleek-e-yaumuddin*, etc., then with the passing of time and changes in the style of writing the differences in the manuscript would have become a source of great contention. Therefore, on the advice of Umar, Abu Bakr decided to have an authentic copy of the Qur'an prepared under state patronage and thus put an end forever to the possibility of differences in recitation obscuring the true meaning of the text.

For this purpose Zayd ibn Thabit was the most competent, as he was the *katib* of the Prophet. Zayd and Ubayy ibn Kaab both had joined in the 'last recitation' having heard the Qur'an directly from the Prophet in the order, which is still extant today. Not only had they memorised the entire Qur'an, but they also possessed the entire Qur'an in written form. The first caliph commanded them to collect all the available pieces of the Qur'an and compile it (Bukhari). After this decision had been taken, Umar made an

announcement in the Mosque that whoever had any piece of writing from the Qur'an should bring it and hand it over to Zayd.

During the first caliphate, the Qur'an not only existed in written form on the bark of date palms, stones, leather, etc. but was also preserved in the memory of the companions. The Qur'an, when made into a book, was arranged in the order memorized by the companions, and the verses have been preserved in that same order right up to the present day.

Zayd ibn Thabit's work was more a process of collection than of compilation. That is, the scattered bits and pieces of the Qur'an in written form were collected by him, not so that they could be assembled and bound in one volume, but so that they could be used to verify the authenticity of the Qur'an as memorised and passed on in oral tradition by countless individuals. Once this exact correspondence between the oral and written forms of the Qur'an had been established beyond any reasonable doubt, Zayd proceeded to put the verses of the Qur'an down on paper in their correct order.

Harith Muhasibi writes in his book, *Fahm As-Sunan*, that the transcription of the Qur'an was nothing new, because the Prophet himself had arranged for it to be written down. But it was written separately on *Riqa 'a*, *Likhaf*, *Katf*, *'Asib*, etc. Abu Bakr Siddiq ordered that it be written down as preserved in the memory of the companions, on one size of paper in the order with which we are familiar today. All the materials on which the Qur'an was written were present in the Prophet's house, but in scattered form. What the collector did was assemble all these parts and then bind them together so that no part was destroyed. (*Al-Itqan*, v. 1, p. 40)

This elaborate arrangement of the Qur'an was made so that there should not be even the minutest difference vis-à-vis the original revelation. If this extraordinary care had not been taken, differences would have resulted from the slightest lapse in memorising and transcription. For instance, when Umar recited this verse to Zayd ibn Thabit, "As for those who led the way, the first of the Muhajirs and the Ansar, those who nobly followed them," Zayd said, that he remembered this verse with *waw*, that is, with 'and' after Ansar. So the investigation started, finally the other memorisers of the Qur'an came and confirmed that the opinion of Zayd was right. So in the volume the verse was written with the addition of 'and'.

In former times, when the accepted way of disseminating the subject matter of a book was to memorise it, then recite it; it was quite exceptional that the Qur'an should have been memorised and preserved in writing. This was like having a 'double checking' system, whereby memory plus written words and written words plus memory could be constantly checked against each other.

After Zayd ibn Thabit had prepared the entire Qur'an and bound it in the form of a book, all other materials collected from different companions, for the purpose of checking and rechecking, were all burnt. Now this volume was handed over to the caliph. After Abu Bakr's death it remained with Umar, the second caliph. After the death of Caliph Umar it remained in the custody of Hafsa, daughter of Umar and wife of the Prophet.

During the caliphate of Uthman, Islam had spread far and wide, and the number of Muslims was legion. Moreover, the companions who taught the Qur'an had gone to different countries that had come under the fold of Islam. For instance, the Syrians learned the Qur'an from Ubayy ibn Kaab, the Kufans (the inhabitants of Kufa, a city in Iraq) learned the Qur'an from Abdullah ibn Masood and the Iraqis in general from Abu Musa Ash'ari. However, due to differences in accent and styles of writing, controversies again began cropping up. People even called one another heretics owing to such differences. (*At-Tibyan, Aljazairi*)

Ibn Abi Daud writes in his book, *Al-Masahif*, quoting Yazid ibn Muawiyah Nakhai, that once when Huzayfa ibn Al-Yaman was present in the mosque of Kufa he found a group reciting the Qur'an. One of them recited a certain verse and said: This is the way of recitation of Abdullah ibn Masood. Another recited it with a different accent and said that was how Abu Musa Al-Ashari recited it. Huzayfa was enraged on hearing this. He stood up and made a short speech in which he said: "Those before you (people of the book) differed just like this. By God, I will go riding to the leader of the believers, Uthman, the third caliph."

Huzayfa was a military officer posted in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and had just come back from doing battle. But when he reached Madina, instead of going straight home, he went directly to the third caliph and addressed him thus: "O Leader of the believers! Take care of the people, before they fall victim to the differences regarding the book of God just as the Jews and the Christians did."

During the caliphate of Uthman there entered the fold of Islam peoples whose mother tongue was not Arabic, and who were not able to speak the language with the proper accent and pronunciation. Even the various Arab tribes themselves had different accents and pronunciation. Hence the discrepancies in the recitation of the Qur'an. The result was that the Qur'an too began to be written according to varying pronunciations. Ibn Qutayba writes that the Bani Huzayl tribe used to pronounce 'hatta' as 'atta'. Since Ibn Masood belonged to this tribe, its members saw no reason to deviate from this pronunciation. Such differences in recitation came to be reflected in the transcription of the Qur'an. This is only one of many examples which illustrate this point. Given this state of affairs, Uthman, as advised by Huzayfa ibn Yaman, had copies made of the volume prepared by Abu Bakr, then sent one copy each to all cities. This task was again entrusted to Zayd ibn Thabit Ansari, who was provided with eleven people to assist him. As per the order of the third caliph the committee wrote down the Qur'an in accordance with the spelling of the Quraysh, so that it should confirm to the accent (*lehja*) of the Prophet of Islam. Caliph Uthman subsequently ordered that all other copies of the Qur'an, which people had written on their own, should be handed over to the government. These were all then burnt by the order of the caliph.

By this method, all the copies of the Qur'an were made uniform as far as writing was concerned. However, taking natural differences into consideration – since all the people were not able to pronounce the Qur'an uniformly – permission was given for the Qur'an to be recited with seven different pronunciations and accents. The collection prepared by Abu Bakr was done one year after the death of the Prophet. The copies ordered by Uthman were produced fifteen years after the Prophet's death.

These copies of the Qur'an, made with extraordinary care and precision, were passed on from generation to generation until the age of the press dawned. Many printing presses were then established in the Muslim world, where the beautiful calligraphy of the scriptures was reproduced after its content had been certified by memorisers of the Qur'an. Thus, once again, with the help of the memorised versions and written texts, correct, authentic copies were prepared; then with the publication of these copies on a large scale, the Qur'an spread all over the world.

It is an irrefutable fact acknowledged by the Orientalists, that any copy of the Qur'an found in any part of the world at any time will be exactly the same as that handed down to the Muslims by the Prophet in his last days, arranged in the form still extant today.